

ADYAR PAMPHLETS

No. 7

The Meaning and Method of
Spiritual Life

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September 1911

(Reprinted for the second time November 1916)

THEOSOPHICAL PUBLISHING HOUSE

ADYAR, MADRAS, INDIA

The Meaning and Method of Spiritual Life

IN considering the meaning and the method of the spiritual life, it is well to begin by defining the meaning of the term "spiritual," for on that there exists a good deal of uncertainty among religious people. We constantly hear people speaking of "spirit" and "soul" as though they were interchangeable terms. Man has a "body and soul," or a "body and spirit," they say, as though the two words "spirit" and "soul" had no definite and distinct meaning; and naturally if the words "spirit" and "soul" are not clearly understood, the term "spiritual life" must necessarily remain confused. But the Theosophist, in dealing with man, divides him in a definite and scientific way both as regards his consciousness and as regards the vehicles through which that consciousness manifests, and he restricts the use of the word "spirit" to that Divine in man that manifests on the highest planes of the universe, and that is distinguished by its consciousness of unity. Unity is the key-note of spirit, for below the

spiritual realm all is division. When we pass from the spiritual into the intellectual we at once find ourselves in the midst of separation.

Dealing with our own intellectual nature, to which the word "soul" ought to be restricted, we at once notice that it is, as is often said, the very principle of separateness. In the growth of our intellectual nature we become more and more conscious of the separateness of the "I". It is this which is sometimes called the "I-ness" in man. It is this which gives rise to all our ideas as to separate existence, separate property, separate gains and losses; it is just as much a part of the man as spirit, only a different part, and it is the very antithesis of the spiritual nature. For where the intellect sees "I" and "mine" the spirit sees unity, non-separateness; where the intellect strives to develop itself and assert itself as separate, the spirit sees itself in all things and regards all forms as equally its own.

It is on the spiritual nature that turn all the great mysteries of the religions of the world, for it is a mystery to the ordinary man, this depth of unity in the very centre of his being, which regards all around it as part of itself, and thinks of nothing as separately its own. That which is called in the Christian religion the "Atonement" belongs entirely to the spiritual nature, and can never be intelligible so long as the man thinks of himself as a separate intellect, an intelligence apart from others. For the very essence of the Atonement lies in the fact that the spiritual nature, being everywhere one, can pour itself out into one

form or another ; it is because this fact of the spiritual nature has not been understood, and only the separation of the intellect has been seen, that men, in dealing with that great spiritual doctrine, changed it into a legal substitution of one individual for other individuals, instead of recognising that the Atonement is wrought by the all-pervading spirit, which, by identity of nature, can pour itself into any form at will.

Hence we are to think of the spirit as that part of man's nature in which the sense of unity resides, the part in which primarily he is one with God, and secondarily one with all that lives throughout the universe. A very old Upaniṣhaṭ begins with the statement that all this world is God-inveiled, and going on then to speak of the man who knows that vast, pervading, all-embracing unity, it bursts into a cry of exultation : " What then becomes of sorrow, what then becomes of delusion, for him who has known the unity ? " That sense of a oneness at the heart of things is the testimony of the spiritual consciousness, and only as that is realised is it possible that the spiritual life shall manifest. The technical names—by which we, as Theosophists, mark out the spirit—matter not at all. They are drawn from the Samskr̥t, which for millennia has been in the habit of having definite names for every stage of human and other consciousness ; but this one mark of unity is the one on which we may rest as the sign of the spiritual nature. And so again it is written in an old Eastern book, that " the man who sees the One Self in everything, and all things in the

Self, he seeth, verily, he seeth". And all else is blindness. The sense of separation, while necessary for evolution, is fundamentally a mistake. The separateness is only like the branch that grows out of a trunk, and the unity of the life of the tree passes into every branch and makes them all a one-ness; and it is the consciousness of that one-ness which is the consciousness of the spirit.

Now in Christendom the sense of one-ness has been personified in the Christ, the first stage—where there is still the Christ and the Father—is where the wills are blended, "not my will but thine be done"; the second stage is where the sense of unity is felt: "I and my Father are one." In that manifestation of the spiritual life we have the ideal which underlies the deepest inspiration of the Christian sacred writings, and it is only as "the Christ is born in man," to use the Christian symbol, that the truly spiritual life begins. This is very strongly pointed out in some of the Epistles. St. Paul, writing to Christians and not to the profane or heathen—to those who have been baptised, who are recognised members of the Church, in a day when membership was more difficult to gain than it is in these later times—says to them: "Ye are not spiritual: ye are carnal." And the reason he gives for regarding them as carnal and not spiritual is: "I hear that there be divisions among you"; for where the spiritual life is dominant, harmony, and not division, is to be found. And the second great stage of the spiritual life is also marked out in the Christian scriptures, as in all the other great

world-scriptures, when it is said that, when the end cometh, all that has been gathered up in the Christ, the Son, is gathered up yet further into the Father, and "God shall be all in all". Even that partial separation of Son and Father vanishes, and the unity is supreme. So that whether we read the *Upaniṣhats*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, or the Christian *New Testament*, we find ourselves in exactly the same atmosphere as regards the meaning, the nature of the spiritual life: it is that which knows the one-ness, that in which unity is complete.

Now this is possible for men, despite all the separation of the intellect and of the various bodies which bar us out the one from the other, because in the heart of our nature we are Divine. That is the great reality on which all the beauty and power of human life depend. And it is no small thing whether, in the ordinary thought of a people, they rest upon the idea that they are divine, or have been deluded into the idea that they are by nature sinful, miserable and degraded. Nothing is so fatal to progress, nothing so discouraging to the growth of the inner nature, as the continual repetition of that which is not true: that man fundamentally and essentially is wicked, instead of being Divine. It is a poison at the very heart of his life; it stamps him with a brand which it is hard indeed for him to throw off; and if we want to win even the lowest and most degraded to a sense of inner dignity, which will enable them to climb out of the mud in which they are plunged, up to the dignity of a Divine human nature, we must never

hesitate to preach to them their essential Divinity, and that in the heart of them they are righteous and not foul. For it is just in proportion as we do that, that there will be within them the faint stirrings of the spirit, so overlaid that they are not conscious of it in their ordinary life ; and if there is one duty of the preacher of religion more vital than another, it is that all who hear him shall feel within themselves the stirring of the Divine.

Looking thus at every man as Divine at heart, we begin to ask : If that be the meaning of spirit and spiritual life, what is the method for its unfolding ? The first step is that which has just been mentioned, to get people to believe in it, to throw aside all that has been said about the heart of man being " desperately wicked " ; to throw aside all that is said about original sin. There is no original sin save ignorance and into that we are all born, and we have slowly to grow out of it by experience, which gives us wisdom. That is the starting point, as the conscious sense of unity is the Crown. And the method of the spiritual life is that which enables the life to show itself forth in reality as it ever is in essence. The inner Divinity of man, that is the inspiring thought which we want to spread through all the Churches of the West, which too long have been clouded by a doctrine exactly the reverse. When man once believes himself Divine, he will seek to justify his inner nature.

Now the method of the spiritual life in the fullest sense cannot, I frankly admit, be applied to the least developed amongst us ; for them the very first lesson

is that ancient lesson: "Cease to do evil." In one of my favourite *Upaniṣhads*, when it speaks of the steps whereby a man may search after and find the Self, the God within him, the first step, it is said, is to "cease to do evil". That is the first step towards the spiritual life, the foundation which a man must lay. The second step is active: to do the right. These are two commonplaces which we hear on every side, but they are no less true because commonplace, and they are necessary everywhere and must be repeated until the evil is forsaken and the good embraced. Without the accomplishment of these, the spiritual life cannot be begun. And then, as to the later steps, it is written that no man who is slothful, no man who is unintelligent, no man who is lacking in devotion, can find the Self. And again it is said that: "The Self is not found by knowledge nor by devotion, but by knowledge wedded to devotion." These are the two wings that lift the man up into the spiritual world.

To fill up these broad outlines which are set to guide us to the narrow ancient Path, we may find a mass of details in the various scriptures of the world, but what is specially needed just now, is the way in which people living in the world, bound by domestic ties, and ties of occupation of every sort, how these people may have a method by which the spiritual life may be gained, by which progress in real spirituality may be secured. It is true that in all the different religions of the world there has been a certain inclination to draw a line of division between the life of the world and

the life of the spirit ; that line of division, which is real, is, however, very often misunderstood and misrepresented, and is thought to consist in circumstance, whereas it consists in attitude—a profound difference, and one of the most vital import to us. Owing to the mistake that it is a difference of circumstances which makes the life of the world and the life of the spirit, men and women in all ages have left the world in order to find the Divine. They have gone out into desert and jungle and cave, into mountain and solitary plain, imagining that by giving up what they called “the world,” the life of the spirit might be secured. And yet if God be all-pervading and everywhere, He must be in the market-place as much as in the desert, in the house of commerce as much as in the jungle, in the law-court as much as in the solitary mountain, in the haunts of men as well as in the lonely places. And although it be true that the weaker souls can more easily sense the all-pervading life where the jangle of humanity is not around them, that is a sign of weakness and not a sign of spirituality. It is not the strong, the heroic, the warrior, who asks for solitude in his seeking for the spiritual life.

Yet in the many lives that men lead in their slow climbing to perfection, the life of the solitary has its place, and often a man or woman for a life will go aside into some lonely place and dwell there solitary. But that is never the last and crowning life, it is never the life in which the Christ walks the earth. Such a life is sometimes led for preparation, for the

breaking off of ties which the man is not strong enough otherwise to break. He runs away because he cannot battle, he evades because he cannot face. And in the days of the weakness of the man, of his childhood, that is often a wise policy ; and for any one over whom temptations have still strong power it is good advice to avoid them. But the true hero of the spiritual life avoids no place and shuns no person ; he is not afraid of polluting his garments, for he has woven them of stuff that cannot be soiled. In the earlier days sometimes flight is wise, but it should be recognised as what it is—weakness, and not strength. And those who live the solitary life are men who will return again to lead the life of the world, and having learned detachment in the solitary places will keep that power of detachment when they return to the ordinary life of men. Liberation, the freeing of the spirit, that conscious life of union with God which is the mark of the man become Divine, that last conquest is won in the world, it is not won in the jungle and the desert.

In this world the spiritual life is gradually to be won, and by means of this world the lessons of the spirit are to be learned—but on one condition. This condition embraces two stages : first, the man does all that ought to be done because it is duty. He recognises, as the spiritual life is dawning in him, that all his actions are to be performed, not because he wants them to bring him some particular result, but because it is his duty to perform them—easily said, but how hard to accomplish ! The man need

change nothing in his life to become a spiritual man, but he must change his attitude to life; he must cease to ask anything from it; he must give to it everything he does, because it is his duty. Now that conception of life is the first great step towards the recognition of the unity. If there be only one great life, if each of us is only an expression of that life, then all our activity is simply the working of that Life within us, and the results of that working are reaped by the common Life and not by the separated self. This is what is meant by the ancient phrase: "give up working for fruit"—the fruit is the ordinary result of action.

This advice is only for those who will to lead the spiritual life, for it is not well for people to give up working for the fruit of action until the more potent motive has arisen within them, that spurs them into activity without the prize coming to the personal self. Activity we must have at all hazards; it is the way of evolution. Without activity the man does not evolve; without effort and struggle he floats in one of the backwaters of life, and makes no progress along the river. Activity is the law of progress; as a man exercises himself, new life flows into him, and for that reason it is written that the slothful man may never find the Self. The slothful, the inactive man has not even begun to turn his face to the spiritual life. The motive for action for the ordinary man is quite properly the enjoyment of the fruit. This is God's way of leading the world along the path of evolution. He puts prizes before men. They strive

after the prizes, and as they strive they develop their powers. And when they seize the prize, it crumbles to pieces in their hands—always. If we look at human life, we see how continually this is repeated. A man desires money; he gains it, millions are his; and in the midst of his millions a deadly discontent invades him, and a weariness of the wealth that he is not able to use. A man strives for fame and wins it; and then he calls it: “A voice going by, to be lost on an endless sea.” He strives for power, and when he has striven for it all his life and holds it, power palls upon him, and the wearied statesman throws down office, weary and disappointed. The same sequence is ever repeated. These are the toys by holding out which the Father of all induces His children to exert themselves, and He Himself hides within the toy in order to win them; for there is no beauty and no attraction anywhere save the life of God. But when the toy is grasped the life leaves it, and it crumbles to pieces in the hand, and the man is disappointed. For the value lay in the struggle, and not in the possession, in the putting forth of powers to obtain, and not in the idleness that waits on victory. And so man evolves, and until these delights have lost their power to attract, it is well that they shall continue to nerve men to effort and struggle. But when the spirit begins to stir and to seek its own manifestation, then the prizes lose their attractive power, and the man sees duty as motive instead of fruit. And then he works for duty’s sake, as part of the One Great Life,

and he works with all the energy of the man who works for fruit, perhaps even with more. The man who can work unwearying at some great scheme for human good and then, after years of labour, see the whole of it crumbling to pieces before him, and remain content, that man has gone far along the road of the spiritual life. Does it seem impossible? No. Not when we understand the Life, and have felt the Unity; for in that consciousness no effort for human good is wasted, no work for human good fails of its perfect end. The form matters nothing; a form in which the work is embodied may crumble, but the life remains.

And in order to make it very clear that such a motive may animate men even outside the spiritual life, we may consider how sometimes in some great campaign of battle it is realised that success and failure are words that change their meaning, when a vast host struggles for a single end. Sometimes a small band of soldiers will be sent to achieve a hopeless, an impossible task. Sometimes to a commanding officer may come an order which he knows it impossible to obey: "Carry such-and-such a place"—perhaps a hill-side, bristling with cannon, and he knows that before he can gain the top of that hill his regiment will be decimated, and, if he presses on, annihilated. Does it make any difference to the loyal soldier who trusts his general and leads his men? No. The man does not hesitate when the impossible task is put before him; he regards it only as a proof of the confidence of his commander, that he knows him strong enough to fight and inevitably fail.

And after the last man dies, and only the corpses remain, have they failed? It looks so to those who have only seen that little part of the struggle; but while they held the attention of the enemy, other movements had been made unnoticed which rendered victory secure, and when a grateful nation raises the monument of thanks to those who have conquered, the names of those who have failed in order to make the victory of their comrades possible will hold a place of honour in the roll of glory, and of the nation's gratitude. And so with the spiritual man. He knows the plan cannot fail. He knows that the combat must in the end be crowned with victory, and what matters it to him, who has known the One-ness, that his little part is stamped by the world as failure, when it has made possible the victory of the great plan for human redemption, which is the real end for which he worked? He was not working to make success here, to found some great institution there, he was working for the redemption of humanity. And his part of the work may have its form shattered; it matters not, the life advances and succeeds.

That is what is meant by working for duty. It makes all life comparatively easy. It makes it calm, strong, impartial, and undaunted; for the man does not cling to anything he does. When he has done it, he has no more concern with it. Let it go for success or failure as the world counts them, for he knows the Life within is ever going onwards to its goal. And it is the secret of peace in work, because those who work for

success are always troubled, always anxious, always counting their forces, reckoning their chances and possibilities; but the man who cares nothing for success but only for duty, he works with the strength of divinity, and his aim is always sure.

That is the first great step, and in order to be able to take it there is one secret that we must remember: we must do everything as though the Great Power were doing it through us. That is the secret of what is called "inaction in the midst of action". If a man of the world would become truly spiritual, that is the thought that he must put behind all his work. The counsel, the judge, the solicitor, what must be the motive in each man's heart if in these ordinary affairs of life he would learn the secret of the spirit? He must regard himself simply as an incarnation of Divine Justice. "What," a man says, "in the midst of law as we know it?" Yes, even there, imperfect as it is, full of wrongs as it may be, it is the Justice of God striving to make itself supreme on earth; and the man who would be a spiritual man in the profession of the law must think of himself as an incarnation of the Divine Justice, and always have at the heart of his thought: "I am the Divine hand of Justice in the world and as that I follow law." And so in all else. Take Commerce. Commerce is one of the ways by which the world lives—a part of the Divine activity. The man in Commerce must think of himself as part of that circulating stream of life by which nations are drawn together. He is the Divine Merchant in the world, and in him Divine activity

must find hands and feet. And all who take part in the ruling and guidance of the nations, they also are representatives of the Divine Lawgiver, and only do their work aright as they realise that they incarnate His life in that aspect towards His world. I know how strange this sounds when we think of the strife of parties, and of the pettinesses of politicians; but the degradation of man does not touch the reality of the Divine Presence, and in every ruler, or fragment of a ruler, the Divine Lawgiver is seeking to incarnate Himself in order that the nation may have a national life, noble, happy and pure. And if only a few men in every walk of life strove thus to lead the spiritual life; if, casting aside all fruits of individual action, they thought of themselves as only incarnations of the many aspects of the Divine activity in the world, how then would the life of the world be made beautiful and sublime!

And so in the life of the home. The head of the household, the husband, incarnates God in His relation of supporter and helper of the life of His universe. So much has this been seen in older days that the Logos of the universe, God manifest, is said in one old Hindū book to be the Great Householder. And so should every husband think of himself as incarnating the Divine Householder, whose wife and children exist not for his comfort or delight, but in order that he may show out the Divine as perfect man, as husband and father. And so also the wife and mother should think of herself as the incarnation of the other side of Nature, the side of matter, the

nourisher, and show out the ceaseless providing of Nature for all her children's needs. As the great Father and Mother of all protect and nourish their world, so are the parents to the children in the home where the spiritual life is beginning to grow. Thus might all life be made fair; and every man and woman who begins to show the spiritual life becomes a benediction in the home and in the world.

The second great step that men may take, when duty is done for duty's sake, is that which adds joy to duty—the fulfilment of the Law of Sacrifice; that noblest, highest, view of life, which sees one's self not as the Divine Life merely in activity in the world, but as the Divine Life that sacrifices Itself that all may live. For it is written that the dawn of the universe is an act of sacrifice, and the support of the universe is the continual sacrifice of the all-pervading Spirit that animates the whole. And when that mighty sacrifice is realised as the life of the universe, what joy more full and passionate than to throw oneself into the sacrifice and have a share in it, however small, to be part of the sacrificial life by which the worlds evolve. Well might it be said by those who see life, and realise what it means: "Where, then, is sorrow, where then delusion, when once the one-ness has been seen?" That is the secret of the joy of the spiritual man. Losing everything outside, he wins everything within.

I have often said, and it remains true ever, that while the life of the form consists in taking, the life of the spirit consists in giving, and it is that which

made the Christ, as the type of the Spiritual Giver, declare: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." For truly, those who know the joy of giving have no hankerings after the joy of receiving; they know the upwelling spring of joy unfailing that arises within the heart as the Life pours out. For if the Divine Life could flow into us and we keep it within ourselves, it would become even as the mountain-stream becomes if it be caught in some place whence it may not issue, and gradually grows stagnant, sluggish, dead; but the life through which the Divine Life pours unceasing, knows no stagnation and no weariness, and the more it outpours the more it receives. Let us not, then, be afraid to give. The more we give the fuller shall be our life. Let us not be deluded by the world of separateness, where everything grows less as we give it. If I had gold, my store would lessen with every coin that I give away; but that is not so with things of the spirit; the more we give, the more we have; each act of gift makes us a larger reservoir. Thus we need have no fear of becoming empty, dry, exhausted; for all life is behind us, and its springs are one with us; once we know the life is not ours, once we realise that we are part of a mighty unity, then comes the real joy of living, then the true blessedness of the life that knows its own eternity. All the small pleasures of the world which once were so attractive fade away in the glory of the true living, and we know that those great words are true: "He who loseth his life shall find it unto life eternal."

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Printed by Annie Besant, at the Vasanta Press, Adyar, Madras.

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